

Healthcare Is a Right, Not a Favour

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For many young women in South Africa, walking into a clinic should mean getting help. But research and first-hand accounts show that stigma, judgement, and unprofessional treatment are pushing them away, especially from family planning and STI services. The result is that many girls skip treatment, avoid testing, and go without the care they need.

One of the biggest barriers reported by adolescent girls is the stigma they experience at clinics. Many say they are shamed by healthcare workers and made to feel they are too young to be sexually active. Studies also show that young people often face judgement, a lack of privacy, and judgemental attitudes from healthcare providers. Many girls say staff assume they are sexually active simply because they ask about contraception or STIs. As a result, some stop using family planning services or default on STI treatment because they would rather avoid returning than face being shouted at or shamed because of their age.

Some young women also report being diagnosed with an STI without proper testing. According to one source, Cindy said she went to the clinic because of an infection. When she arrived, staff told her it was an STI, even though she was not sexually active. She said she was diagnosed without any tests being done to confirm it. Cindy added that many girls fear going to the clinic because of these assumptions. She also claimed that some staff members sit and discuss patients, laugh, and behave in a rude and unprofessional manner.

In many public clinics, STI diagnosis often relies on symptoms rather than laboratory tests because accessible and affordable diagnostic testing is limited. When girls feel they are being diagnosed based on assumptions instead of proper testing, they lose trust in the healthcare system and are less likely to return. Reports of rudeness, gossip, and breaches of confidentiality only make the situation worse.

Professionalism matters. Qualitative studies from scholars such as Müller, A., Röhrs, S., Hoffman-Wanderer, Y., & Moul, K. (2016), have found that some healthcare providers admit they judge young people when they seek care and acknowledge that a lack of confidentiality is a major barrier. Young women themselves say they fear being judged by clinic staff and want more privacy, respect, and understanding.

The consequences are serious. Fear of judgement leads some girls to stop taking family planning or STI medication, increasing the risk of unintended pregnancies, untreated infections, and other health complications. Young girls are already navigating school pressure, poverty, gender-based violence, and many other social challenges. A clinic should not be another place of fear. Every girl has the right to walk into a health facility and be treated with kindness, confidentiality, dignity, and respect. Healthcare is not a

favour, it is a right. Healthcare providers have a responsibility to deliver that care with professionalism, compassion, and respect.

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